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ABSTRACT

Mark Baker in "NAM: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There" (1981) tells a war story, and war stories tend to elevate the masculine combat adventure as inherently more profound, and therefore more valuable, than other experiences. However, now that the emotional considerations of war are no longer being discounted, it seems appropriate that many survivor books are being written by, and focusing on, women. In "Casaulties: Death in Viet Nam; Anguish and Survival in America" (1984), Heather Brandon models her book on the veterans' oral histories and discourse with the community of families who lost one of their own in the war. Joan Didion in "Democracy" offers glimpses into the lives of her fictional "glitterati," reflecting snatches from the lives of real-life public figures, disclosing more personally the struggle to situate oneself amid the shards of contemporary American historical experience, in which Vietnam figures prominently. Writing from and representing the opposite social perspective, West Virginia native Jayne Anne Phillips' "Machine Dreams," which appeared, like "Democracy," in 1984, focuses primarily on women. Phillips' subject is history and the passage of time, the dislocations peppering the lives of her characters, and she portrays the dissolution of family life as a reflection of individual lives fragmenting, and cultural order decaying. (A chronological listing of significant dates interspersed with a list of Selected Survivor Texts are appended.) (RAE)

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# Up Against the Wall

N. Bradley Christie



In the wake of the Carter pardon for draft evaders and resisters, the hero's welcome for American hostages returned from Iran, and Ronald Reagan's sweeping promise to dispel the notion of post-Vietnam "malaise," a new brand of Vietnam text began to appear. In 1981 Mark Baker and Al Santoli offered the first of the war's "oral histories." Baker's NAM evolved as a project inspired by the changing times. Rather like a journalistic relative of Michael Herr, Baker aimed to re/cover the war by uncovering a heretofore unsounded community of discourse. "No one has bothered to talk to the men and women who went to Vietnam and fought the war," Baker could write in 1981; to that point their stories had largely been consigned to the "cold storage of statistics, history and politics," or to the "mythic realm of heroism or evil or rock 'n' roll madness."[1] Like Herr, Baker dissociated himself from "the others"--journalists, film-makers, generals, diplomats, and politicians--who propagated the discourse of exclusion and revisionism; his object was the something "missing . . . something personal and palpable" that only those who fought the war were qualified to relate.

Two features in particular distinguish a project like NAM from earlier recovery pieces like Dispatches. First is the obvious fact that Baker himself never went to Vietnam, even as a

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[1] Mark Baker, NAM: The Vietnam War in the Words of the Men and Women Who Fought There (New York: William Morrow, 1981; Berkley Books, 1983), xii.

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reporter, nor did he pay the war much mind while it was being waged by others of his own generation. A college student and holder of a "nice, privileged draft deferment," Baker also admits to being involved only peripherally with the antiwar movement: "I joined the demonstrations when my idealism moved me, if it was convenient" (xiii). Only experiencing the war secondhand, chiefly in print and on television, he knows that he is hardly qualified to tell the whole story, though he wants to hear it and record it accurately. Secondly, whereas Herr uncovers the war from a multiplicity of perspectives (including numerous war stories involving the young grunts he feels closest to), Baker focuses solely on the veteran's experience, privileging it over the writer's effort as the essence of the war's secret history. Thus, despite the fact that he interviewed some 150 veterans for the book, Baker offers NAM as a singular story of the war, a paradigm even suggested by the book's organization around the narrative model of one soldier's progress from initiate to veteran back in the World. I cannot help but think that that one soldier, whose experience of the war comprises the collective memories of any vets who will talk to him, is Mark Baker himself; that NAM finally represents his own vicarious tour in-country, and as such it testifies to the deep-seated pangs of "Viet guilt" that gnaw at many of his generation who stayed at home, or worse.

Baker points to another common anxiety when he writes of the war and its "cultural ramifications" as providing "the ritual passage to adulthood for a generation of Americans--[his] generation" (xvi). He is careful to keep the phrase genderless,

but Baker must be sensitive to the predominantly male idiom of his narrative. NAM tells a war story, after all, and war stories tend to elevate the masculine combat adventure as inherently more profound, and therefore more valuable, than other experiences. War narratives then consistently rehearse and valorize a hegemonic male ideology that posits war as a (the?) test of manhood, Baker's "ritual of passage" in its proper wolf's clothing. Not going to fight, instead reading, writing, and occasionally objecting to the war--all sheepish, pacific and, by implication, feminine activities--Baker and thousands of others who stayed at home may be casualties nonetheless, suffering from a culturally inscribed inferiority complex because they failed their generation's gunslinging test.

It was relatively easy to suppress those subtle psychic wounds in the face of a war clearly going wrong; as Baker hints, one could always channel such guilt-driven energies into a protest or demonstration. By the late 1970s, however, the social climate had changed, and a period of reflection was imminent. Latent feelings of self-reproach surfaced as America slogged through a national lassitude that President Jimmy Carter consistently attributed too facilely to the aftereffects of a bad war. Ironically, the event which most markedly precipitated the end of the Carter presidency probably also marks the definitve turning-point in national outreach toward those who served, and especially to those who served and survived, in Vietnam. For frustration over the Americans held hostage for fourteen months in Iran pointedly recalled the country's vexation with the

Indochina war; and the release and attendant rejoicing upon the hostages' return stirred memories of revilement and neglect for tens of thousands of veterans returned from Southeast Asia. Belated parades and monuments, more positive images on film and television, and most signally the Memorial wall in the nation's capital count among the principal legacies of that long-suppressed guilt. Literary accounts like the oral histories and survivor novels are extending that legacy well beyond the Reagan eighties.

By way of unifying his contribution to the legacy, Mark Baker focuses on the commonness of the men and women he interviewed, unexceptional people except that "they survived Vietnam and continue to survive" (xiv). Guilt often visits them, too, as they live on with the memories of so many who died instead of them. Survivors of every stripe, that is, have reason to recover the war in all of its exacting and painful detail for the sake of those who did not make it back. Survivor texts therefore tend to accentuate what Baker identifies as the "personal equation" (xv), the kind of account not only charged with its own emotion, but attempting to recreate the emotions which originally charged the event/s being reconstructed. Whereas a book like Dispatches brilliantly conveys how the war *was*--what it looked, sounded, smelled and tasted like on the outside--books like NAM disclose how the war *felt*, what purchase it claimed on the inside, where vets could seal it up and bring it back with them.

It would be absurd to suggest that being and feeling were

mutually exclusive in Vietnam, that earlier literary responses to the war wholly discount emotional considerations, or that recent memory texts do not describe the physical nature of the war. It simply appears that until recently the culture's obsession with "getting it right" dictated a focus on the war's material character. Perhaps we really were too close to the pain of defeat and deception to distinguish the war from the warriors, or to consider that the warriors might share that pain. Now that we seem to have a firmer grasp on what happened in Vietnam, we can afford to assess the emotional damage; the physical wreckage is remote enough for most of us to admit the notion that "getting it right" includes coming to terms with what happened on the inside.

2.

As I implied above, many of those terms are typically allied to the feminist project, so it seems appropriate that many survivor books are being written by, and focusing on, women. With her book Casualties: Death in Viet Nam; Anguish and Survival in America (1984), Heather Brandon offers a firsthand account that perfectly exemplifies the new kind of survivor text that is a distinct product of Reagan-era responses to the war in Vietnam. Brandon models her book on the veterans' oral histories, transcribing hours of taped interviews; but her sources represent still another previously untapped reservoir of discourse, the community of families who lost one of their own in the war. Al Santoli had gestured toward these casualties in dedicating Everything We Had to "the families of the men and women who served in

Vietnam," but he left it to later interviewers actually to seek them out. Brandon did so because she counts herself among their number. In 1965 her cousin was reported missing in action; she wrote him daily until the body was found; in 1974 she finally cried. By 1980, she began to talk with families "feeling as torn apart and isolated" as her own.[2] As Baker, Santoli, and others had discovered with the veterans, Brandon found that in many cases no one had ever asked these people to speak about their loss. In 1982, seventeen years after her cousin's death, she started to put the book together.

While Casualties is not the most engaging memoir of the war, it is noteworthy as a personal record more familiar than the veterans' accounts to the millions of Americans who lived through the war at home. Like Mark Baker, Brandon confesses to paying the war little mind during the 1960s and early '70s; she grieved over the loss of her cousin and suffered privately with her family, but even that intrusion into her personal life did not provoke a studied consideration of what the war really was or what it was doing to the country at large. Only years later, she remarks, did "Vietnam [begin] to soak into me, both as the emotional experience of those who served, and as a still ill-defined national experience for those of us who did whatever we did or did not do through the long years of their struggle" (xx). Despite (or perhaps because of?) media saturation coverage during the war, for Brandon and millions more like her, war remained "a

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[2] Heather Brandon, Casualties: Death in Viet Nam; Anguish and Survival in America (New York: St. Martin's, 1984), xvii.

concept; death and injury in war abstract." Conversations with survivors, and especially with combat veterans, have rendered those abstractions concrete for writers like Brandon and Baker, and in turn for their readers. Vicariously we benefit from their contact with those who were there, in an odd way re-covering the war as we experienced it the first time, second- or thirdhand. This time, however, we willingly bring the war back into our living rooms because we regret not having focused initially on the proper details. The surrogate memory exercised in survivor texts attempts in part to justify or otherwise legitimate earlier vicarious experience.

Brandon points to the same missing element, the personal equation that becomes the focus of Baker's text. She is not inspired by what Vietnam looked or smelled or sounded like, but what it felt like to fight a war there. Like the other survivor journalists, she champions emotion as the neglected concrete matter that belies war as an abstraction for the warrior. "Combat veterans brought emotion to my ideas," Brandon concludes, echoing Baker's reminder that survival is always a matter of attending to the concrete (xvi). To the extent that all of our ideas may benefit from emotional concretion, and inasmuch as all of us harbor feelings about the war, survivor texts again imply that we need not have been there to have a valid experience of Vietnam.

Since Casualties, several other volumes have aimed to relate the common experience of particular parties of the haunted generation, most notably Wallace Terry's Bloods: An Oral History

of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans (1984), and Kathryn Marshall's In the Combat Zone: An Oral History of American Women in Vietnam, 1966-1975 (1987). Gradually, we are even beginning to hear from Vietnamese victims, some of whose stories Al Santoli includes in his second oral history, To Bear Any Burden (1985). And finally, a collection of soldiers' letters, Dear America (1985), perhaps pushes the national zeal for probing the American veterans' experience beyond the point of vicariousness to the brink of voyeurism.

All the while, a number of those veterans have persisted in translating their Vietnam memories into novels. Larry Heinemann, Philip Caputo, and Tim O'Brien especially are proving themselves among the first-rate writers of contemporary fiction, whether they choose to write about Vietnam or not. In one sense, as I noted earlier, all of these works are survivor books, but as in the nonfictional forms, women novelists (who obviously did not fight in Southeast Asia) are turning to Vietnam as material for some of the most compelling survivor texts.

3.

In a rather ambivalent notice, novel critic Frederick Karl concludes about Joan Didion that ". . . even as she enlarges with her frenzied cutting back and forth, she diminishes everything she touches." And Didion certainly is a virtuoso parer, with her characteristically terse prose cutting to the core of her favorite themes: cultural chaos; the disintegration of American morals; individual and societal fragmentation; the reflexivity of

personal and national dissolution. Vietnam, then, would seem to provide the perfect background for a Didion novel, the opportunity she availed herself of in her fourth novel, Democracy (1984). The book is a curious meld of novelistic conventions--at once a love story, murder mystery, political narrative, novel of manners, and contemporary metafiction--centered around the striking Inez Christian Victor, wife of a US Senator and would-be candidate for President. Janus-faced Harry Victor perhaps represents American democracy's lowest and most pervasive life-form, but he is intrinsically less interesting than the indifferent daughter of class and privilege he married to finish the photo opportunities that shape the lives of public figures. That notion of a life captured in a sequence of random snapshots informs the book itself, which Didion in her role as first person narrator describes as a "novel of fitful glimpses."[3] Indeed the narrator's project develops from an assortment of photographs snipped from the pages of Business Week, Fortune, and the New York Times, "the shards of the novel" that she does not intend to write (29). Rather, she pieces the glimpses together, fashioning a fictional tour de force which provocatively mirrors the fitful photo-opportunity events of the last American decade or so. Glimpses into the lives of her fictional glitterati may well reflect snatches from the lives of real-life public figures whom Didion, like Inez Victor, has certainly had occasion to encounter. More signally, however, they disclose Didion's personal

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[3] Joan Didion, Democracy (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1984), 232.

struggle to situate herself amid the shards of contemporary American historical experience, in which Vietnam figures prominently.

Inez Victor concludes that the major cost of public life (and Didion's own life is fairly public) is "Memory," losing track of what happened during your life (51). Like sorting through photos from the past, novel writing is a sense-making enterprise; as she tries to situate Democracy within a literary tradition embracing Trollope and Melville, Adams and Orwell, Hemingway and Mailer (and poets from Housman to Eliot and Stevens), Didion strives to order the scraps of her own memories. Central to those recollections are details from 1975, the year of the novel's climactic events, as well as the year of collapse in Indochina. At the time she read "only those stories that seemed to touch, however peripherally, on Southeast Asia," logging only the striking dislocations--the cost of a visa to leave Cambodia, for instance, the colors of the landing lights for helicopters on the embassy roof in Saigon, the code names for American evacuations from Vietnam and Cambodia (73-74). In real life, as in novel writing, "we go with what we have. Cards on the table" (17). As these memories recall for Didion the "black hole effect" of time toppling, folding in on itself and disintegrating like a house of cards, the factual collapses back into the fictional: the murder which marks the dissolution of the Christian and Victor families occurs in late March, 1975.

Inez Victor finally settles in Kuala Lumpur where she dines at the club, teaches an evening course in American Literature at

the local university, and administers the city's dozen refugee camps. And Joan Didion writes novels like Democracy which take their own course, belying "the narrative inevitability that usually propels a novel toward its end, the momentum that sets in as events overtake their shadows and the cards all fall in on one another . . ." (232-33). She may still teach the occasional literature course exploring the idea of democracy in the work of certain post-industrial writers (71). And she probably also dines at the club.

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Writing from and representing the opposite social perspective, West Virginia native Jayne Anne Phillips published her first novel, Machine Dreams, in the same year that Democracy appeared. Phillips adopted another conventional novelistic form, the family saga, which she chronicles in the voices of individual family members through the generations. Phillips reconstructs the world of rural and small-town West Virginia, as unlike Didion's tropic capitals and centers of international commerce as a place can be. Unlike Inez Victor's Hawaii and her overcrowded Asian isles, Bellington, West Virginia only reluctantly forfeits its pacific insularity to the ravages of external social forces beyond the townfolk's control. Gradually the Depression, World War II, and Vietnam--the most momentous events of the American twentieth century--exact their wearing toll on Bellington, and especially on the Hampsons, the family whose particular history Phillips proffers as a model of American culture on the skids.

As in Democracy, the novel focuses primarily on women--on Jean, a child of the Depression '30s, a bride of the postwar '40s, and her daughter, Danner, a true child of the troubled '60s. Phillips' subject, like Didion's, is history and the passage of time, the dislocations peppering the lives of her characters. Jean's ill-considered marriage to Mitch Hampson is not unlike Inez Victor's, the expected fulfillment of social custom; the Hampsons have two children, a girl and a boy, and the parents stay together until the children are grown--to make them safe, as the Victors do in Didion's novel. Like Didion, Phillips portrays the dissolution of family life as a reflection of individual lives fragmenting, and cultural order decaying.

In certain individual relationships, however, Phillips locates a binding claim which does not bond Didion's characters. In her opening "Reminiscence to a Daughter," Jean tells Danner, "you and I will go on and on, despite whatever differences, whatever quarrels. For me, we are what's left. How are we different? Body and soul, I know--but some things don't change." She has remembered how she married when her own mother was dying, and how her husband failed to fill that void. Finally she recalls her joy at Danner's birth: "when I knew I had a daughter, I was so thankful--like my own mother had come back to me."[4] Although their girls end up leading similar lives of dislocation, one can hardly imagine Inez Victor reminiscing so to her daughter. Though she writes her once a week from Kuala

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[4] Jayne Anne Phillips, Machine Dreams (New York: Dutton/Seymour Lawrence, 1984), 22.

Lumpur, Inez and Jessie do not go on and on.

Danner Hampson nurtures a second affirming bond, with her brother Billy. Though only by eighteen months or so, she is the older of the two, and often charged with watching over him as they were growing up. Despite his sister's best efforts to protect him, Billy insists that he must go to Vietnam, that his number is up, and within two months of his arrival in-country he is listed as missing in action. As the novel closes, Billy has been missing for over two years. And Danner continues to watch over him, in her memories and dreams.

In the novel's closing sections, which record Danner's reflections (as her mother's opened the book), the memories pile up until the one image that occupies them all is Billy. Like the moon-faced Cacciato of Tim O'Brien's fantastic novel, Billy's young face--"his kid face" of Danner's dreams, "more real than any photograph or memory" (326)--presides over the past. And most of Danner's memories concern safety, the security of the younger Hampsons' world before war shattered both of their lives, as earlier wars had blasted the world of their parents. "My father owned a concrete plant," Danner's recollections begin, suggesting from the first her fixation on the rock-solid and foundational. "He wore khaki shirts and work pants," she continues, "the same kind of clothes he wore in wartime photographs . . ." (297). Almost instantly this image of her father, the rock man, evokes a memory of riding the school bus with Billy "past bus shelters emblazoned with our father's name, and the name of the plant: MITCH CONCRETE." Sunk deeply into the solid

West Virginia earth, "The shelters were well built and didn't leak," and they still stand in 1972, well kept and newly lettered, though her father sold the plant years ago and steadily weakened in his daughter's eyes.

But Danner recalls other safe structures, especially Fort Knox, where Billy went for basic training; she sees the Gold Vault, "a bunkertype building that looks like a two-layered concrete box cake with barred windows. I think about all those gold bars sitting inside a well-fortified silence, row after row of gold bars. Billy was golden, in the summer; he got that kind of tan" (299). To ensure Billy's refuge from the war, she takes out a student loan to send him to Canada, and only half-jokingly proposes a marijuana bust which would land her brother in "some nice safe jail for first offenders for a couple of years. By the time you get out, Vietnam is over" (302). For all she knows, of course, he may be in some jail somewhere, but he is not likely safe, and the war is not over--for any of them.

Consequently, Danner now muses on the past "in terms of what Billy knew. The information he took away with him . . . . The world, so to speak. . . . What he'd practiced, what he'd perfected before he ever laid hands on an M-60" (325-26). Her reflections are titled "The World," alluding to the GI's vision of home in the States; "Sometimes it seems like I dreamed everything but this, because what I remember was in the World," Billy writes in his last letter to his sister. And he points her toward another vision, of the world (small 'w'), a shifting foundation of the concrete:

> Not much time to sit on my ass here wondering is the war right or wrong--right is getting thru and pulling everyone else thru, getting bodies back if we can't get anything else. I'm with Luke [his helicopter crew chief and mentor] and the crew and we live in the chopper. These guys are the only country I know of and they're what I'm defending--I'm not stupid enough to think my country is over here. (291)

Two years after receiving this letter, Danner comes to appreciate her brother's point. "It seems as though Billy, whom I always tried to instruct, is instructing me. And he isn't even here, not right now" (299). She quits school like he did, and she moves to the west coast (as close to Vietnam as she can get?), where she learns that "my parents are my country, my divided country. By going to California, I'd made it to the far frontiers, but I'd never leave my country. I never will" (324). At last the novel circles back to Jean's early conclusion that "we are what's left." She stayed in a bad marriage, she confesses to Danner, only "to make you safe. It turned out I couldn't keep anyone safe. Not you. Not Billy" (22). Safety is one of the machine dreams of contemporary American culture.

Throughout the novel Phillips intersperses the machine dreams which lend the book their title. Mitch Hampson's dreams of 1946 rehearse the bulldozing of rotting, mangled bodies--victims of war--into mass graves in New Guinea; he also dreams of going places in his polished new Pontiac Silver Streak, "shining and private and quiet like the interior of a big jewel" (68). In

1957 Billy dreams of the cement mixers at the concrete company; by 1963 he dreams of having his own car and flying airplanes. Although Danner has a recurrent erotic dream of winged horses, she is less captivated by human devices, perhaps because she is a woman. In 1969 "She'd been interested in the moon landing but not fascinated; it was just machines." Instead, like Inez Victor in her curiosity about events in Southeast Asia, she "kept track of details the astronauts told reporters later, small things"--the feel and smell of moon dust, Neil Armstrong's recurrent childhood dream of hovering over the ground (241). In the novel's final section, thinking about the past in terms of what Billy knew, Danner relates a machine dream in which her magic horse and her brother's flying machines both appear. The siblings are children again; Danner stalks the winged horse through a deep forest while Billy imitates "with a careful and private energy the engine sounds of a plane that is going down. War-movie sounds. *Eeee-yoww, ach-ack-ack.* So gentle it sounds like a song, and the song goes on softly as the plane falls, year after year, to earth" (331).

Clearly Danner's last machine dream signifies her grow-ing embittered isolation, from her own desires and their fulfillment, and most signally from the brother who, in the dream at least, keeps his three-year-old promise to "keep [his] ass in the air," safe above the reaches of the war (267). Walking deeper into the dark woods, Danner, too, is missing in action. The dream allows her to keep Billy alive, however tenuously, and thus it bears the trace of the other machine dreams, all of which project emblems

of power and control, and of flight from the shifting ground of contemporary existence.

As summer begins to take hold in Bellington in 1972, Jean Hampson keeps the upstairs bedrooms in her house just as they were in 1969, before Billy went to Vietnam. At night now she makes quilts as she sits alone by the television. And when Danner is home Jean maintains her motherly presence as if her daughter had never left. "Her admonishments are low-key and continuous," Danner remarks, "as though a war is coming, rationing, proud impoverishment, or a death: something requiring fortitude. Except that a thing more continual than death has already happened, and fortitude is an ongoing process" (305). That mood of apprehension pervades Machine Dreams, facilitating the smooth flow of voices over the years. One reviewer detects a "strong sense of foreboding" in the novel; another, fellow Southern novelist Anne Tyler, defines that sense as the unspoken possibility of war that shadows the novel's events. In Billy Hampson's words (recalling one of Joan Didion's favorite tropes in Democracy), "'It's in the cards.'" "'What cards?'" Danner wants to know. "'Everyone's cards.' He looked over at her. 'It'll be different for you after I go'" (267). Billy speaks no truer words in the novel, as the future shortly bears out. Danner's world is different after Billy goes; so is the world of their parents; so, even, are their dreams.

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## Selected Survivor Texts

1979

[Iran hostages]
*Tracers* (DiFusco, et al.+)
*The Short-Timers** (Hasford+)

1980

1981

*NAM* (Baker)
*Everything We Had* (Santoli+)

1982

[Veterans Memorial, Washington, D.C.]
*The 13th Valley** (Del Vecchio+)

1983

*Chickenhawk* (Mason+)
*Home Before Morning* (Van Devanter+)
*Charlie Company* (Goldman and Fuller)
*Meditations in Green** (Wright+)

1984

*Bloods* (Terry)
*Payback* (Klein)
*Long Time Passing* (MacPherson)
*Casualties* (Brandon)
*Democracy** (Didion)
*Machine Dreams** (Phillips)

1985

*A Vietcong Memoir* (Truong Nhu Tang)
*To Bear Any Burden* (Santoli+)
*Dear America* (Edelman)
*Carrying the Darkness* (Ehrhart+)
*In Country** (Mason)
*The Nuclear Age** (O'Brien+)

1986

*A Portrait of the Enemy* (Chanoff and Doan Van Toai)
*The Vietnamese Gulag* (Doan Van Toai and Chanoff)
*Paco's Story** (Heinemann+) [National Book Award]

1987

*In the Combat Zone* (Marshall)
*Indian Country** (Caputo+)
*American Blood** (Nichols)

* novels
\+ Vietnam veterans